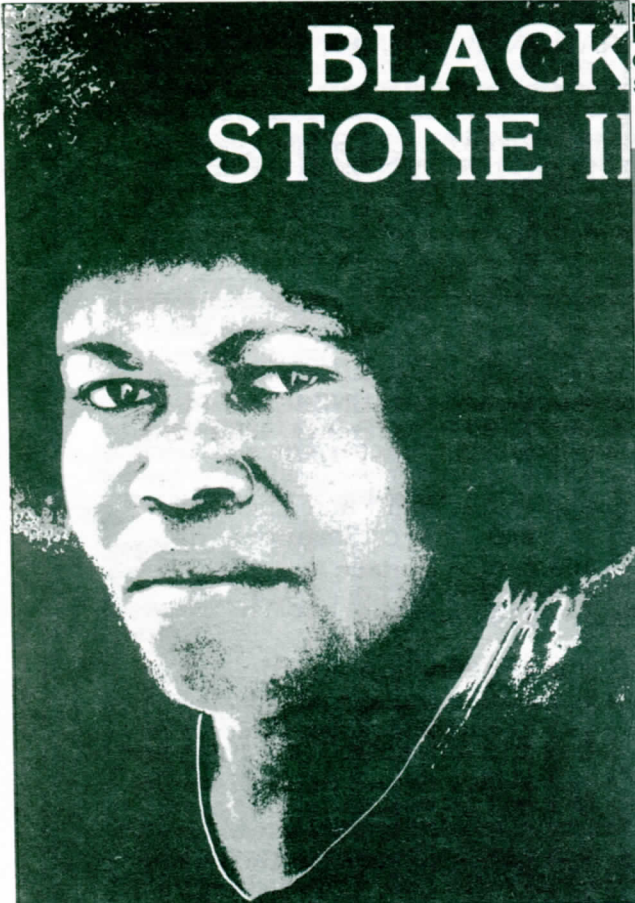


Vanuatu, Melanesia and the Pacific have come a long way since the lifetimes of our grandparents, our parents, and even in the decades we ourselves have lived and operated or become conscious of our social environment and how we are situated within it.

Since our ancestors allowed white people onto our shores and let them live with us and influence us we have increasingly accepted their ways while trying to retain some vestiges of our Melanesianness. If development is taken to mean retaining some elements of our own knowledge while acquiring enough introduced knowledge and technology to interact with the rest of the world on an equal footing, then we can say that we have made progress, but we have a long way to go.

On the part of our own knowledge or culture we have lost sight of those elements that need to be adapted for application in the present for our benefit. On the part of introduced knowledge we are behind in communications, economic empowerment and political participation. Men and women are different but they have the same needs. Men and women are born into the same environment having in place the same institutions, channels and processes for their political involvement and empowerment, but along the way rules are made and applied to produce two different situations, one for men and another for women.

The root cause of the social, economic and political power imbalance between men and women in Melanesia is land. Land ownership. Land use. Land administration. To own land is to be secure. To be someone. To be independent. To have power. To have



BLACK STONE II

Melanesian Women Moving On

by Grace Mera Molisa

authority. To have status. Without land the woman is nothing. Without land the woman herself becomes a commodity on the male market. The woman, without land, becomes available to be sold, bought and owned as a movable asset.

If Melanesian women want their status to change for the better, we women have to look at our land tenure systems and our land-use behaviour patterns to ensure

that they meaningfully cater to women's needs. One way of making the appropriate changes to cater to and accommodate women's needs as whole human persons is to involve 'women's issues at every level of development, particularly politics.

'Women's issues conscious women', means continuous training on-the-job, on gender issues, to eliminate negative attitudes and habits, inject positive attitudes, introduce effective approaches for the equal development of our human resources and build on our existing strengths for the continuous improvement of the status of women.

Only when 'women's issues conscious women' are in politics, administration, and all decision-making bodies, will changes occur in women's favour. Otherwise you can have token women in high positions but they won't be any use for women because they will have the same mind set as men. They will always agree with men, obey men, be afraid of men and go along with men.

'Women's issues conscious women' in positions of power take initiatives to work within the system in favour of women. Suitable women in relevant jobs breathe feminism into everything they are involved in. Otherwise women just maintain stereotypical men's executives and men's-will-obey.

On a development continuum Melanesia contrasts sharply with other parts of the Pacific Region because sections of the Melanesian population can be spread right across from both ends of the continuum unlike those parts of the Pacific that are mono-cultural, mono-lingual, never colonised, where women have pride of place. In those situations women's problems would seem to be fewer and easily unified approaches to their solutions relatively easier to come by.

Developments so far

Melanesian women have made gains in the critical areas of concern but have a long way to go in all of them to arrive at a situation that we can all be satisfied with considering our Melanesian diversity and our spread across different stages of development. Against this background particular areas are immediately clear as requiring emphasis and focus for future attention.

To name a few - Melanesian women are allowed to vote and could contest elections. Very many women's interest groups exist. A Women's Resource Bureau has been set up at the South Pacific Commission (SPC) Secretariat for the coordination of women's activities in the South Pacific. Some networking is happening. However not much more is happening, just like there is very little or no lobby to positively support the Bureau at SPC and correspondingly the Bureau cannot do more than it tries to do with the scarce resources at its disposal.

Problems encountered

In my experience in Vanuatu the problems encountered on the way to achieving the progresses we have so far made all boil down to one. The one major problem is women. Women against women. One on one. Group against group.

Women bickering, in-fighting, disuniting, disorganised, defending petty parochial territories, pursuing personal power bases. Women unable to rejoice in the success of another woman, unable to be together in hard times, unable to be together in good times, women are woman's worst obstacle. We women are our very own worst enemy.

All other difficulties posed by culture, politics, or any other classification can be overcome if we women get our act together and put our collective will to it.

Vision towards 2000 AD

I have an active faith in women. I hope we women can find the ways and means to cast off our pretenses and excuses in order to recognise and accept truth and reality enough to be able to work together, with a common vision, in striving for common goals, addressing our common needs, collectively advancing our cause, concertedly uplifting our common status.

I believe that at year 2000 AD we can look back and be able to measure by all the statistics and quality of life indicators and say that we have moved on from 1995, and that women in the leadership of women's groups and departments can say that they have in place clear frameworks within which to exercise their functions, and, what is more, that they know what they should be doing in those positions.

Where do we go from here? Health, education, politics, economic empowerment. Critical areas of concern have been identified globally, regionally, sub-regionally. We Melanesian women need to take the same areas of concern and re-prioritise them. Let the national machineries, NGO machineries know who we are and what we are doing, so that they can put in place mechanisms in different ministries and institutions to monitor and co-ordinate our activities in an integrated manner, ensuring continuous improvement nationally as we Melanesian women and men move on towards equality, development and peace.

Outlook for the future

Vanuatu is an archipelago supporting a multi-cultural, multi-lingual population. Archipelagic countries have communications topping their list of administrative and other problems. Communications is the motor to every human action. Communications on every level, every dimension, personalised verbal forms and documentary forms from the simple speech used in the time of Noah's Ark to the electronic mass information super highways beyond 2000 into the twenty-first century. We women can't go very far or anywhere if, in the first place, we don't come to grips with communication and make it work for us.

The one area that women are not moving into is politics. All Melanesian countries have had exceptional women in the corridors of power but their numbers are to-date acutely small. We women need to know that when men are by themselves in the political arena they end up seeing and thinking only of themselves. It can happen and it happens. Women need to be there to let it be known that women exist, to say what women have to say, to make sure things happen the way women want things to happen.

Women have in place in 1995 the ratification of CEDAW without reservations. Vanuatu women have to look at the feminisation of poverty as the root cause of their lack of power, low status, and violence against women, in view of our respective Melanesian land tenure system, recognising that land is the source of our Melanesian identity, Melanesian livelihood, Melanesian economic resources, Melanesian political power, Melanesian authority and status.

When we arrive at this view, it is clear that the determining factor is land ownership. Land is the source of economic authority. Who owns it? Who controls it? Who administers it? Who uses it? Who works it? The long term outlook for Vanuatu women in this area is to look at our land ownership and land use systems and to make appropriate changes for the economic empowerment of women.

CONCLUSION

To conclude I want to come back to communications. Communications is a big field. We can get lost in it. We can't go anywhere unless we recognise it for the animal or thing it is and domesticate it so we can ride it or use it. Even in the simplest matter of speech or talking there is a great deal more to it than conversing in gossip. How we use the language we speak can do or undo so many things. We women need to find out how we can use the things we have like language and talking, or communicating, with each other, in ways that can benefit us mutually and collectively.

In Vanuatu the most common chorus of the women's movement song is "I didn't know, we don't know."

We all sing it many times. What percentage of women in each of the Melanesian countries know the Beijing process enough for us to say we understand about women's human rights awareness and the women's movement as it happens:

in our mind
in our house
in our village
in our island
in our country

and how we personally and organisationally are contributing to that process of women's rights awareness and development?

Ni-Vanuatu women are very good at criticising what someone else is doing and complaining ... "if - only - this... and if - only - that..." What is important in our development is not that which will happen if ... this ..., or if ... that... What is important is what each one of us is able to do and we get on and do it. Development is not what someone else does. Development is what we do ourselves to help ourselves.

We women have to learn to re-direct our energies away from our personal jealousies, envy, covetousness, that go into excuses and pretenses that make up our dishonesty to ourselves and everyone else, so that we can start looking at our own selves and gear ourselves to doing what we can do to improve our situation and doing it to the best of our ability so that we can be the best that we can be in the field that we choose to be involved in. So that when people see us and think of us, they can see and think of different aspects of the Image of God in us, through us, enough to be drawn to our vision so that we can draw nearer to each other, nearer to God, as we, together, move on, towards equality, sustainable development and peace because together we stand, divided we fall.▲

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